

## **Empowerment through Feminine Narrative in the Male Supremacy in the Black Prince**

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### **Abstract**

*Murdoch assigns the narration of a first male-narrator followed by four postscripts in which other characters (three of them are female) get a chance to speak their own view of the events. The paper reveals how the empowerment of the unique narrative structure enables the female characters to retell the story in their own way and for their own aim in the hegemony of male supremacy and indicates that the well-designed experimental narrative mode makes the male-female dialogue on the basis of equality possible. Through the analysis of the confusion brought by this multi-voiced narration, the paper also illustrates Murdoch's view on gender that the liberation of women is not to snatch the discourse power from men and take it for women's own use but to share the equal discourse power with men to keep the balance between the two genders, which is in accord with her philosophical ideas on women's liberation and women's movements.*

**Keywords:** Feminine Narrative; Male Supremacy; Iris Murdoch; The Black Prince

The narrative is to “a way of imposing order on contingent events, a way of making sense of experience, present or past, which provides us with a coherent sense of self.” (Rowe, 2004, p. 102) According to Murdoch, narrative is “a way of judging, a way of evaluating the world that surrounds us, and this gives us in return a sense of our own identity, our separateness, our own self-being” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 253). The narrators Murdoch uses, especially her preference to use the male first-person narrator, in her works are of the critics' high concern. As far as the female characters are concerned, how can they form their identity in the male narration with the discourse power?

Since Murdoch insists that there are no distinctions between the genders and likes to “write about things on the whole where it doesn't matter whether you're male or female” (Lennon, 1978, p.82), she uses the first-person male narrator frequently in her works. At a colloquium held at Caen, France in 1978, Murdoch responds to the questions of the male narrative voices in her novels as follows:

About writing as a man, this is instinctive. I mean I think I identify more with my male characters than my female characters. I write through the consciousness of women in those stories which have different narrators, so I write as women also in those stories as well as men; but I suppose it's a kind of comment on the unliberated position of women ... I think I want to write about things on the whole where it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, in which case you'd better be male, because a male represents ordinary human beings, unfortunately, as things stand at the moment, whereas a woman is always a woman! In fact of course I'm very interested in problems about the liberation of women, particularly, for instance, in so far as these concern education. I'm interested in them both as a citizen and as a writer, so they do come in to some extent ... It's a freer world that you are in as a man than as a woman ... A woman is much more self-conscious than a man, just as a black person is more self-conscious than a white person. (Dooley, 2003, p. 82)

Her response also reflects her opinion on the point of women's liberation that is not “to say we're better, or we're special, or we're wonderful, but just to be equal, to be ordinary, to join the human race, to be people, just people like everybody else” (Dooley, 2003, p. 83).

Murdoch's views on the male narrator in her works and the main point of women's liberation drive her to apply an experimental narrative structure in *The Black Prince* to approach the issue of establishing female identity.

This novel is structured by two forewords (one by the editor P. Loxias and the other by Bradley himself), the body part, and six postscripts (one by Bradley, four by main characters in the novel, and one by P. Loxias). Bran Nicol argues that postscripts reveal inaccuracies in Bradley's narration which causes the reader to be suspicious of "the very notion of truth itself" (Nicol, 2004, p.97). Meanwhile, Peter Conradi proposes a conflicting but equally convincing interpretation on the function of these postscripts. He believes that they support and question Bradley's story at the same time and "thus service our sense of the plot more than they destabilize our grasp of it" (Conradi, 2001, pp.233-65). Anne Rowe argues that this novel lays bare "the paradox at the center: the impossibility of a stable truth and the premise of the novel as a truth-revealing form" and actively invites "contradictory readings" (Rowe, 2004, p. 152). Murdoch believes that the natural ability of story-telling is an essential "way of thinking" (Murdoch, 1997, p.252) and "a fundamental mode of consciousness" (Murdoch, 1997, p.252) that could promote our understanding of the world and then orient ourselves and strengthen sense of self within this world. In *The Black Prince*, Murdoch shows the reader the autobiographical story of the male narrator at first and then the final four postscripts of the main characters, three of whom are female, cast doubt on the validity of the preceding narrative. The narrative structure Murdoch uses in this novel provides the female characters not only with an opportunity to recount the story from their own perspective and make their views heard, but also with power to question the male discourse in the male supremacy. This kind of reactive narration is more constructive to female discourse and more destructive to the male discourse than the pure female first-person narrative.

The four postscripts by the four main characters in Bradley's story succeed in deconstructing Bradley's account but fail to invalidate it since these four narrators in the postscripts distort their accounts for their private reasons. Though these female character's limitations are mercilessly exposed by these distorted narration, these postscripts still empower them to strive for the equal dialogue with the male, which is so essential to form their female identity. The challenges to the authority of the male discourse and the support to the formation of the female discourse are evident in the close reading of the story by Bradley and the following postscripts in the light of Murdoch's understanding of identity.

Francis's postscript, the only one by a male, is a case in point. In Bradley's story, Francis is depicted as a wretched and unsound homosexual whose physician's registry is cancelled for an irregularity involving prescription drugs. Most people around him, including his sister Christian, think nothing of him. In his postscripts, he sets himself up as an authoritative and professional psychoanalyst and takes Bradley's story as a case study of his psychological analysis. Although this sudden transformation of Francis's identity, the aggression of his analysis, and the incredibility of his conclusion make the reader readily reject his narration, Francis's "discourse helps demonstrate centripetal versus centrifugal momentum of language, the way perspectives rearrange themselves" (Heusel, 1995, p.135). Francis discovers in Bradley "the classic symptoms of Oedipus complex" (Murdoch, 1978, p.389) as Bradley loves his mother and hates his father, which leads to his hatred and fear to all women in his adult life. Francis reveals the ubiquity of the resistant emotion to women in the male-dominated society as men "see women as unclean" (Murdoch, 1978, p.389) and the idea of menstruation as "sickening and appalling" (Murdoch, 1978, p.389). He summarizes the female principle as "what is messy, smelly, and soft" while the male principle as "what is clear, clean, and hard" (Murdoch, 1978, p.389). And Bradley is "gloating over the physical discomfiture, the uncleanliness, the ailments of his women" (Murdoch, 1978, p.389) since they are "liars, traitors, cowards" (Murdoch, 1978, p.390) And Bradley's disgust at her sister and his protest against the duty to her is contributed to her symbolic meaning to him as "*the shop*, that stale interior, symbolic of the rejected womb of a socially inferior mother" (Murdoch, 1978, p.390). In contrast, Bradley describes himself "as a self-confessed puritan, an ascetic, a tall thin man, a sort of human Post Office Tower, erect and steely" (Murdoch, 1978, p.390). Francis's postscript forces the reader to cast doubt on all of Bradley's utterances on women for his prejudices against them and undermines "the authenticity of the entire book" (Heusel, 1995, p.135) by questioning "whether Loxias is a voice of Bradley rather than an authentic editor" (Heusel, 1995, p.135). Thus, "the entire novel becomes a celebration of heteroglossia, the protean phenomenon of language" (Heusel, 1995, p.135).

Unlike Francis's postscript deliberately written in an objective and academic tone, the other three postscripts given by the female characters appear to be rather subjective and self-centered. Christian's postscript denies almost all the Bradley's narration and comments on her and their marriage. She tells a totally different story of what happened in the past. Both narrations are justifiable, so truth, always interpreted from different personal perspectives, is just a matter of opinion, conjecture, and personal preference.

The failure of their five-year marriage leaves Bradley with “a sense of things irrevocably soiled and spoiled” (Murdoch, 1978, p.17), so his instinctive reaction to the news of Christian’s return is repulsive. He refuses to see her for he “cannot think of anyone I less want to see or hear of” (Murdoch, 1978, p.16). In his eyes, Christian is “a death-bringer” (Murdoch, 1978, p.17), but not “a life-bringer” (Murdoch, 1978, p.16) any more that she was at first. Bradley detests her for she brought “disorder” (17) into his life as “a great maker of scenes” (Murdoch, 1978, p.17). He also admits that the powerful influence that Christians imposes on him is long-lasting and prevalent: “her consciousness was rapacious, her thoughts could damage, passing like noxious rays through space and time. Her remarks were memorable” (Murdoch, 1978, p.17). Then Bradley negatively predicts that Christian is eager to see him out of curiosity and malice in order to satisfy herself with his wretchedness. So he writes her an unfriendly letter to let her keep away from him because she is “unpleasant”, “cruel” and “destructive” (Murdoch, 1978, p.57) to him. At the same time, Bradley acknowledges that this letter is in fact “some sort of missive simply as an exorcism” (Murdoch, 1978, p.59) because he feels so “worried about Christian and so polluted by a sense of connection with her” (Murdoch, 1978, p.59) that it is “a psychological necessity” (Murdoch, 1978, p.59) to send this letter. And his internal monologue illustrates his true feelings to Christian:

I would also be getting her away from Christian, and I would be getting away from Christian myself. Sheer physical distance can help, perhaps always helps, in the case of these cruder enchantments. I saw Christian as a witch in my life, and a low demon, though I did not in doing so excuse myself. (Murdoch, 1978, p.117)

Bradley’s pretend indifference and tough attitude to Christian can’t conceal his strong emotion for her, his keenly concern with her situation, and the deep and unforgettable frustration he got from the marriage failure, which reduces the credibility of his narration on Christian and their marriage regardless of his repeated description of Christian’s advances and her proposal of reconciliation.

Thus, Christian’s postscript reduces the credibility of the male narrator further and illustrates the deconstruction of male discourse once women have the right to speak. At the very beginning, Christian denies outright the whole book as “off key” (Murdoch, 1978, p.385) to her because “Bradley has been a way of seeing everything in his own way and making it all fit together in his own picture” (Murdoch, 1978, p.385). Her reason for their divorce is not her domination over him but her desire for more fun and happiness that Bradley failed to offer. So she left him in spite of his begging to stay. She retorts upon Bradley’s description of her advances, saying her second marriage is happier, and her visit to him is just for the curiosity and courtesy but not for the reconciliation, and Bradley falls in love with her again but not the reverse. She interprets the fact as: “he wrote those things about hating me and about my being so awful like a sort of female spider as a kind of revenge because I was not friendly enough to him when I came back to London” (Murdoch, 1978, p.386) and because “I just wanted to be friends in a friendly casual sort of a way” (Murdoch, 1978, p.386) and “rejected him the second time” (Murdoch, 1978, p.386). Considering the fact that all his family are very “unbalanced and neurotic” (Murdoch, 1978, p.386) and “could have done with analysis” (Murdoch, 1978, p.386), Christian believes that it was Bradley who killed Arnold Baffin. And she considers Bradley’s love affair with Julian Baffin is just a made-up story to veil his love to her because it happens too suddenly to be true. She attributes all of Bradley’s failures to his shame of his family background and lack of proper education. The only thing that she agrees with Bradley is his praise on her business talent with the proof of the great success of the salon in a few years, which her present husband helps a lot with his knowledge about tax. At the end of her narration, she expresses her opinion on art that is representative for the people with the same undereducated background as her:

And why all this fuss about art anyway, we can live without art I should think. What about social workers and people who work on famine relief and so on, are they all supposed to be failures or not all there? Art isn’t everything, but of course Bradley would think what he’s taken up with is the only important thing. (Murdoch, 1978, p.387)

Christian’s query is not only about the importance of art itself but also on the dictatorship of patriarchal values, which enable the male to set good and bad apart and judge between right and wrong with the discourse power they have.

The third postscript is given by Rachel Baffin who kills her husband in Bradley’s story, which she gives an outright denial. Bradley defines his relationship with the Baffins is “quasi-family friendship” (Murdoch, 1978, p.26).

As Bradley believes the women's roles are "blanker one" (Murdoch, 1978, p.26) with "fewer good lines" (Murdoch, 1978, p.26) compared with the men's roles, Rachel is "an intelligent woman married to a famous man: and instinctively such a woman behaves as a function of her husband, she reflects, as it were, all the light on to him" (Murdoch, 1978, p.26). And as "the efficient wife of a well-known charmer" (Murdoch, 1978, p.26), Rachel has no curiosity and not to mention the ambition because of her blankness. Besides, Bradley doesn't think highly of her appearance and describes it as follows: She is a large, smooth-faced, slightly freckled, reddish-blond person, with straightish gingery wiry hair and a pale complexion, a bit tall for a woman and generally on a larger scale physically than her husband, she had been putting on weight and some might have called her fat. (Murdoch, 1978, p.26)

His depiction of her appearance reveals that she has little physical attraction to him. However, Rachel's narration is quite opposite to his. While Christian's postscript reveals Bradley's cowardice and exasperation as an ex-husband after the divorce, Rachel considers him as the murder of her husband at the opening of her postscript and exposes him as "an object of pity" (Murdoch, 1978, p.395) and feels "pity and compassion" (Murdoch, 1978, p. Murdoch, 1978, p.394) for him because he is "stiff" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396), "awkward" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396), "very timid and shy" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396), "quite pushing" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396) and has an "absurd" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396) appearance. Instead of the "stoical and ascetic" (Murdoch, 1978, p.399) image that Bradley establishes himself in his story, Rachel introduces him as "an unhappy disappointed man", "a figure of fun" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396), and "a subject for amusement" (Murdoch, 1978, p.398) who is "ashamed of his social origin and his illiteracy, and stupidly ashamed of his job" (Murdoch, 1978, p.396).

His general picture of himself really could not have been more false. He pictures himself as ironical and sardonic and restrained and idealistic. To admit to being 'puritanical' sounds like self-criticism, but is just another way of asserting that he was a high-principled man. In reality he was a person quite without dignity. (Murdoch, 1978, p.396) Rachel also implies that his painful consciousness of inferiority might be his reason to commit a serious crime just in order to stop people from laughing at him. Besides, Rachel says that Bradley "turns everything topsy-turvy in his account of his relations with our family" (Murdoch, 1978, p.398) and the truth is that Bradley needs her family "as a sort of parasite, an awful nuisance sometimes" (Murdoch, 1978, p.397), but not the reverse.

In Rachel's eyes, Bradley's story is "farrago of lies" (Murdoch, 1978, p.399) and he is not a writer or artist as he pretends to be. And his "juvenile" (Murdoch, 1978, p.395) tastes in literature even make her doubt if he has ever read Shakespeare and Homer though he talks them a lot. And Bradley is so "print-mad" (Murdoch, 1978, p.399) and so desperate to become famous that he likes to publish his stuff at all costs, for which he writes "his own immediate fantasies" (Murdoch, 1978, p.399) that is only "a sort of mad adolescent dream and not the serious work of art of which he imagined himself capable and of which he so incessantly told us" (Murdoch, 1978, p.399). Rachel asserts that the whole story is just "a smoke screen to conceal his unrepentant malice" (Murdoch, 1978, p.395), partly as "a substitute-idea" and partly as "a pure revenge" (Murdoch, 1978, p.398). And the "proposed disgraceful publication" of "this dreamy-fantasy-nonsense" is just a consolation to Bradley that distracts him "from serious remorse or the effort of repentance" (Murdoch, 1978, p.398). Besides the negative comments on his literary creation, Rachel also analyses Bradley's characters and the reason for his weaknesses. She shares the same opinion as Christian on the point that Bradley "seems to be invincibly wrapped up in his own fantastic conceptions of what happened and of what he himself is like" (Murdoch, 1978, p.394).

In order to conceal her own misdeed, Rachel undermines the incredibility of Bradley's story further by retorting the details in his narration: the domestic violence in her home, Bradley's discovery of her husband's literary talent, her infatuation for Bradley, and Bradley's love affair with her daughter Julian. She contributes the unreliable narration of his story to his eagerness to publish his story, his envy to her husband's success, her refusal to his love, and his own sense of inferiority, which lead him to perform that terrible deed. Though Rachel pretends to be a victim without malice or "vendetta-like resentment against" (Murdoch, 1978, p.395) Bradley since his suffering cannot make up her loss, her confession of the break-up with her daughter Julian, who is a writer and living abroad now, makes the reader suspect what's the truth and throw doubt on her narration. Regardless of the credibility, Rachel's postscript makes it possible to defend the women's interests by themselves though it is not always legitimate or allowable. With the privilege to read the other postscripts, Julian only admits that Bradley's narrative is "a sad story full of real pain" (Murdoch, 1978, p.400) without commenting on the credibility of other postscripts. She confesses her love to his father and Bradley, both of whom are destroyed by her mother's violence.

But she still chooses not to expose her mother's lie saying: "Naturally I endorse (roughly) what my mother says. However what Pearson has to say is true in its way" (Murdoch, 1978, p 400). But the fact that she hasn't seen or communicated with her mother for several years reveals her real attitude to her. Her only disagreement with Bradley's assertion on her life is that her father thinks little of her ability because she believes her father often says "the opposite of what he thought ...out of modesty or fear of destiny" (Murdoch, 1978, p 401). Besides, as a writer, or precisely as a poet, she casts her doubt on Bradley's understanding of art in his story in three points: to take music as the highest art, to identify his Eros with the source of art and to believe that every artist is a masochist to his muse. The equal, though one-way, communication on art with Bradley is the best way for Rachel to commemorate her love to Bradley that is beyond the power of words. Different from the other two postscripts by the women, Julian's postscript presents her rationality and impersonality that the male usually have instead of the irrationality and sentimentality that the female are always characteristic of, which makes the smooth communication with between the men and the women possible. The postscripts suggest various readings of the novel and deconstruct Bradley's account as well as one another. Although the fact distorted for their own needs inspires different interpretations and confuses the reader about the truth, the four postscripts do not invalidate Bradley's long story in the basic sense. Murdoch's closely-structured narration makes the voice of the female in the male discourse possible and the establishment of female identity likely to happen through the comparatively equal communication between the genders. Meanwhile, Murdoch also illustrates that women also have their own limitations and weaknesses when they get the discourse power as the opposite gender through the untruthfulness and egocentricity in the narration of the female characters.

In *The Black Prince*, Murdoch assigns the narration of a first male-narrator followed by four postscripts in which other characters (three of them are female) get a chance to speak their own view of the events. Though Murdoch's well-designed experimental narrative mode makes the male-female dialogue on the basis of equality possible, the contradictory narrations of the three female characters indicate their failure to reveal the truth and empathize with others' plights without any gender discrimination. Instead, the opportunity for them to speak exposes their universal frailties as men's: self-interest and self-center. Unlike Annette in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, the young woman Julian presents considerable self-restraint and self-knowledge when she deals with her love affair with Bradley and plans for her own future regardless of the patriarchal pressure on her. Further, Murdoch illustrates that economic and spiritual independence is a necessity for female identity through the different ways of Priscilla, Rachel and Christian to survive marriage crisis. Priscilla's tragic suicide, Rachel's broken family and Christian's happy remarriage shows the happiness in their life is in proportion to their degree of independence. Christian is a very special female character with complete female individuality, different from other women characters in Murdoch's novels, because she doesn't possess a good education which Murdoch considers an essential for women's freedom and insists on the futility of art in the life which Murdoch takes as the way to goodness in her philosophy. The depiction of Christian conveys Murdoch's philosophical view on women, which is not included in her essay, that independence, practicality, courage to change, and unyielding spirits are equally important to, if not more important than, education and art in women's life.

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